DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 293 EC 309 802

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TITLE	Teachers' Perspectives about Adopting Statewide Curriculum Frameworks for Students in Out-of-District Day and Residential Special Education Programs: Reflections on the Way to Realizing the Promise.
PUB DATE	2001-04-00
NOTE	25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accessibility (for Disabled); *Compliance (Legal); Curriculum Based Assessment; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Regular and Special Education Relationship; Severe Disabilities; *Special Education Teachers; *Special Schools; *State Standards; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys; Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

This paper reports results of a survey of 237 Massachusetts special education teachers in programs for students with significant disabilities as the teachers work to learn and use unitary standards-based curriculum. The study examined: familiarity of the teachers with the state's curriculum frameworks; variations in teachers' experiences and views by the type of student taught; strategies used by teachers to increase their knowledge of the general curriculum; and how the teachers think participation in Curriculum-Frameworks-based instruction and assessment will affect post-school options for their students. Findings indicated that: (1) special education teachers working in highly specialized settings have increased their knowledge of curriculum standards but lack general education curriculum resources; (2) respondents were not optimistic about improved outcomes for their students and fear students will drop out of school without an achievable diploma and face limited post-school options. Questions are also raised concerning difficulties in implementing federal requirements for providing increased access to the general curriculum and for providing appropriate transition services to employment and adult life. (Contains 16 references.) (DB)

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Teachers' Perspectives about Adopting Statewide Curriculum Frameworks for Students in Out-of-District Day and Residential Special Education Programs: Reflections on the Way to Realizing the Promise

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Abstract

Students in out-of-district special education schools - and their teachers – are now included in the general curriculum and large scale assessment. Over 200 Massachusetts teachers in these schools were surveyed to determine their familiarity with the general curriculum and their views of how education reform initiatives will affect their students. The majority reported being some familiarity with general curriculum, using school based study groups to gain their knowledge. Despite the increased curriculum focus, the majority believe their students will not pass high school exit tests and that post-school outcomes will be negatively affected by the lack of a standard diploma.

Standards-based curricula and large scale testing have become critical elements in the education of children with disabilities. IDEA-97, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state legislation mandate that students with disabilities participate fully in the general curriculum and associated accountability systems. Further, NCLB requires that all special education teachers be "highly qualified" in the general curriculum they teach.

Every state but one has implemented standards-based curriculum (AFT, 2001) ranging in focus from basic literacy skills to high level academic content. Some states apply a unitary set of standards to all children. Others have designed separate standards for some students with disabilities.

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In about 40% of the states, students must pass a high school exit examination based on these standards to gain a diploma.

Relating the deliberations of the Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities, McDonnell, McLaughlin and Morison (1997) reported the hopes that standards-based curricula would eliminate disparities across districts and that including students with disabilities in reform initiatives would reveal a more accurate view of educational results and increase expectations for all students. They also asked how full participation could be achieved, whether sufficient resources existed to support the change and whether there would be a resultant decreased focus on the development of skills which support postsecondary options. Acknowledging the shallow research base on full participation, they recommended long-term study of the impact of these changes.

Some education reform promises are being realized (Thurlow, 2002). Special education teachers are increasing their knowledge of the general curriculum and realigning their instruction, surprised to observe the positive changes in their students. General education and special education teachers are sharing ownership more, now that test results for all children are included in district scores. Curriculum personnel and special education teachers are communicating with each other about how to involve all children in the academic subjects. Several studies have documented the productive outcomes of this increased collaboration between general and special education teachers (DeStefano, Shriner & Lloyd, 2001; Goertz, 2001; Herner & Higgins, 2000; Maccini & Gagnon, 2002; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000).

But what happens when there are no general education colleagues with whom to collaborate? Very little has been written about education reforms from the perspective of teachers who provide special education services to students in separate settings where there are few, if any, general education colleagues or supports.

During the 1998-99 school year, 20% of students with disabilities between the ages of 6 and 21 received more than 60% of their education outside the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2001); 3.6% were enrolled in day or residential programs totally separate

from the general education classroom. Educational teams have determined such placements can deliver the intensity of instruction and support these children require (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough, 2002; Lavoie, 2001). Prior to the passage of IDEA-97, students in these separate programs were frequently exempted (some would say excluded) from large scale testing initiatives. Consequently, curriculum focused on each student's individualized goals and objectives (McDonnell, et.al, 1997; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). What do special education teachers think about this shift and its impact on their students?

This study explored the experiences and concerns of Massachusetts special education teachers as they began adopting and adapting our state's Curriculum Frameworks for students attending out-of-district day and residential special education programs. The knowledge gained through analyzing their perspectives may contribute to the small, but growing, research base and inform the work of other teachers working to meet the new challenges for all students.

Four research questions framed the survey design and data analysis of this study:

- How familiar were teachers with the state's Curriculum Frameworks?
- Did teachers' experiences and views differ by the type of student they taught?
- What strategies did teachers find most helpful in increasing their knowledge about the Curriculum Frameworks?
- How do teachers think participation in Curriculum Frameworks-based instruction and assessment will affect post-school options for their students?

Participants

Massachusetts has a broad array of state approved publicly funded private day and residential programs for students with disabilities whose needs cannot be effectively met in public school programs. Most students in these schools are funded through their local school district, whose representatives write IEPs in conjunction with program staff.

The majority of these schools (83%) are members of the Massachusetts Association of Approved Private Schools (MAAPS). This voluntary association delivers an array of professional

development activities and represents the interests of member schools across the Commonwealth. When MAAPS member schools learned of the need to begin addressing the general curriculum and assessment systems, a number formed a Task Force to consider the impact of these mandates. After several meetings, Task Force members began to perceive differences in their concerns and experiences. They thought that this might be due to variations in student disability and academic challenge. They agreed that a survey might help clarify their issues and point the way to productive solutions.

Survey Development

A survey consisting of 19 multiple choice and open-ended items was constructed for this study, based on issues raised through the MAAPS Task Force. Most important were the areas of how teachers acquired curriculum knowledge and what they believed to be outcomes for their students. A second survey was designed for dissemination to program administrators; results are reported elsewhere (Byrnes, in press).

Fourteen (14) MAAPS school administrators distributed a pilot version of the teacher survey in their schools. State Department of Education professionals and consultants involved in the assessment of students with disabilities also provided input. Changes from the pilot to the final survey included eliminating confusing items and ensuring that all terms used were congruent with those in support documents and guidelines disseminated to teachers throughout the state. The final survey was approved by the MAAPS Executive Committee.

A copy of the survey, along with a letter of support from the MAAPS Executive Director and a stamped envelope for return to the author, was sent to all 99 MAAPS member schools. Administrators agreed to distribute copies of the surveys to all teachers during the spring of 2000, capturing the schools' first two years of experience with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and MCAS.

Results

Respondents and their Programs

Completed surveys were received from 42 schools, a school response rate of 42.4%. A total of 237 surveys were received. It is not possible to determine teacher response rate because teachers were not asked for the total number of faculty in their schools. Calculations for all analyses are based on the number of surveys received.

Teachers were asked to identify the primary disability experienced by students; their responses are found in Table 1.

<Table 1 here>

In order of magnitude, teachers identified the following school specializations: students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBD) - 86 teachers in 14 separate schools; multiple disabilities (Mult Disab) – 61 teachers in 11 separate schools; language/learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disabilities (L/LD:EBD) – 53 teachers in 8 separate schools; Deafness/Hard of Hearing (D/HOH) - 12 teachers in 4 separate schools; language/learning disabilities (L/LD) - 12 teachers in 2 separate schools; mental retardation (MR) - 5 teachers in 1 school; autism (Aut) - 4 teachers in 1 school; emotional/behavioral disabilities and mental retardation (EBD:MR) – 4 teachers in 1 school.

Student Participation in MCAS

Each IEP team decides whether a student participates in MCAS through routine administration (the same manner as it is administered to typical students), with accommodations or through alternate assessment. A few teachers (8.0%) did not respond to this question. The percentage of teachers reporting their students' method of participation is displayed in Table 2.

<Table 2 here>

Several teachers chose multiple options, likely reflecting the diversity of their students. About one fifth of the teachers reported that some of their students participated through routine

administration. Teachers choosing this option included those in programs serving students with Deafness/Hard of Hearing (D/HOH), L/LD, L/LD:EBD, and EBD and Mult Disab.

More than half (61.2%) the teachers, representing programs for students with L/LD:EBD, L/LD, EBD, D/HOH and Mult Disab, indicated some students participated with accommodations.

Another 15.2% of teachers reported some student participation through alternate assessment. Teachers in every program type reported using alternate assessment except for those serving children with L/LD:EBD, D/HOH and EBD:MR. Teachers from programs focusing on students with MR, or Aut reported that students participated solely through alternate assessment.

A small number (5.1%) indicated that their students did not participate in the assessment program. These teachers did not indicate whether this was because there were no children in the tested grades during the year of the survey or if their students were not included for other reasons. No publicly funded Massachusetts student can be exempted from taking MCAS.

To explore possible patterns of experience and concern among teachers whose students participated in MCAS in different ways, program types were further clustered by method of student participation. The vast majority (224) of teachers reported student participation primarily through Routine administration and/or with Accommodations (Rout/Acc). Teachers in these programs reported that some students (21.9%) took the test routinely. Taking the test with accommodations was the most frequently cited (64.7%) method of participation. Only 12.5% of these teachers indicated some students utilized an alternate assessment.

Of the remaining 13 teachers, none indicated their students made use of either routine administration or accommodations; 61.5% indicated that their students participated only through alternate assessment methods. This cluster of programs will be described as participating through Alternate (Alt) assessment. Admittedly, this is a small number of teachers, covering only 4 schools. However, because their responses might provide a window into the views of those educators who feel their students are least likely to be able to participate in the standard assessment, it is important to consider their thoughts. Readers should keep in mind that response percentages reported for this

group might be inflated and might not be reflect the opinions and experiences of all teachers in similar programs.

Faculty Familiarity with the Curriculum Frameworks

Teachers were asked to describe their familiarity with Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (CF) in the major subject areas of English/language arts; mathematics; history and social science; and science and technology. Other Frameworks in areas of art, foreign language and heath were not included here since they are not addressed in the statewide assessment system.

Teachers chose more than one category to describe their CF familiarity. While it is not clear why they did so, their responses could reflect that they were more familiar with some subject areas than others. Their ratings are found in Table 3.

<Table 3 here>

Overall, most teachers (58.0%) described themselves as Somewhat Familiar with the CF. More than one third (37.3%) rated themselves as Very Familiar and a small number (5.1%) reported they were Not Very Familiar with the Frameworks. There were some striking differences between the Rout/Acc and Alt groups.

Teachers in Rout/Acc programs were twice as likely to view themselves as Very Familiar as were teachers in Alt programs. The majority of teachers in Alt programs reported themselves as Somewhat Familiar. No Alt program teacher reported having Little or No Familiarity, although some (5.4%) of the Rout/Acc teachers chose this descriptor.

Methods Helpful in Increasing Faculty Familiarity

To learn how teachers gained CF familiarity, respondents were asked to indicate whether they gained their knowledge through school-based study groups, state Department of Education training or meetings at local school districts, three strategies frequently used in public schools. Respondents were encouraged to add other options they utilized. Their ratings are presented in Table 4.

<Table 4 here>

The most frequently selected mechanism was School-based Study Groups, reported by a majority of teachers. All Alt program teachers cited this as a way they became familiar with the Frameworks.

About one quarter (26.2%) utilized state training by the Department of Education (DOE) to increase familiarity; there was little difference between Rout/Acc (26.3%) and Alt (23.1%) program teachers. These meetings marked the first time that special education teachers (in or outside of public schools) were the focus audience for statewide curriculum-based conferences. The small number selecting this option might reflect the fact that these meetings had limited seating capacity and were not able to accommodate all who wished to attend. It is also possible that teacher attendance was reduced due to limited substitute availability.

District public school meetings were cited by a small number of teachers. No teacher from the Alt program group listed this as a tool that increased curriculum knowledge.

Approximately one quarter of Rout/Alt program teachers (27.2%) listed Other mechanisms as helpful, including: taking graduate courses, independently studying the Frameworks, seeking information from a supervisor, and using the CF to design curriculum or to write IEPs. No Alt program teacher listed Other options.

Predictions about Students

Massachusetts is one of the states with high stakes for individual students. To obtain a high school diploma, each student must demonstrate tenth grade proficiency on MCAS tests of English/language arts and mathematics, retaking tests if necessary. Alternate assessment can be used to demonstrate this proficiency. All students in the state are measured according to the same high level academic standards. There are no functional or behavioral standards. States vary widely in the rigor and breadth of their standards.

To understand teachers' thinking about how their students would be affected by participation in the general education curriculum and assessment system, the survey asked whether they believed their students would pass tenth grade MCAS , whether students would remain in school if they were

not likely to pass MCAS and whether an alternate type of diploma would constrain post-school opportunities.

Will your students pass MCAS?

Teacher predictions about whether their students would pass tenth grade MCAS by the end of their time in school are displayed in Table 5. A very small number of teachers (5.4%), all working in Rout/Acc programs, were confident that their students would pass the grade 10 test. The majority of the Rout/Alt program teachers predicted their students would not pass. Slightly more than a third of the Rout/Acc teachers were unsure if students would pass. The Alt program teachers were unanimous, Not one believed students in their programs would meet tenth grade curriculum standards.

<Table 5 here>

Will your students remain in school?

In about 40% of the states, students who do not demonstrate proficiency will not receive a diploma. In the remaining states, the "high stakes" impact districts and schools rather than students. In Massachusetts, a state which holds "high stakes" for students, those who do not pass the tenth grade test may receive a certificate of completion if they have fulfilled all other local school requirements. Teachers were asked whether they thought students not meeting the graduation requirement would stay in school if such a certificate were the likely outcome of their education; Table 6 contains their responses.

<Table 6 here>

The majority of teachers predicted their students would not stay in school. About one quarter thought their students would remain in school regardless of diploma prospects; 16.9% did not respond. Once again, the responses of the Rout/Acc and Alt programs were strikingly different.

While the majority of Rout/Acc teachers indicated they believed students would not stay in school without the possibility of obtaining a standard diploma; only 7.7% of the Alt program teachers made this prediction.

Slightly fewer Rout/Acc teachers (23.6%) than Alt program teachers (30.8%) believed their students would stay in school even if they thought they would not receive a standard diploma.

A small number of Rout/Acc teachers commented that this was not applicable to their students, but did not indicate why. A surprising 61.6% of the Alt group did not reply to this item. Although their reasons were not requested, it is possible these teachers expect their students to remain in school until age 22 regardless of the diploma decision.

Will post-school options be affected?

In one final question, teachers were asked which, if any, post-school options would be constrained for students earning a course completion certificate rather than a traditional high school diploma. Some teachers selected more than one choice. Table 7 contains their responses.

<Table 7 here>

The majority of teachers held that some post-school options would be affected for students who did not earn a standard diploma. Approximately one quarter of all teachers indicated there would be no change in post-school options. Again, there were differences between the groups.

The majority of Rout/Acc program teachers (55.4%) reported that some post-school options would be constrained; 26.8% indicated they thought there would be no change. Teachers in Alt programs were equal in their ratings of whether or not options would be constrained, with 38.5% selecting each choice. A substantial number of Alt program teachers (23.1%) did not respond to this item.

Teachers indicated a variety of constraints. College enrollment limitations were identified by 24.5% of the teachers and job placement choices by 21.5%. Each of these was selected more frequently by Rout/Acc program teachers than Alt program teachers.. Vocational education training limitations were cited by a few (2.7%) Rout/Acc program teachers; curiously, no Alt program teachers selected this option. A very small number of teachers noted that GED options would be constrained, although, since the GED is an alternate path to a high school diploma, their concerns are not clear.

Reflections on Realizing the Promise

Positive steps have been taken. Five years ago, teachers in the schools in this study would not have given much thought to the general curriculum. Their students' performance was neither measured, nor considered in large scale testing. Students were separated from their local schools in body, service and curriculum. Teachers devised their own course content, perhaps alone in individual classrooms. It was easy for the distance to grow.

Questions remain unresolved. Teachers are concerned that their students' efforts will not result in a diploma. They are concerned that, lacking a diploma, their students will not stay in school and will encounter more limited post-school options.

Nolet and McLaughlin (2000) cite four conditions critical to the successful participation of students with disabilities in education reform initiatives. Educators must expect that all will benefit; have knowledge of content standards and expectations, be able to learn from each other and possess a range of appropriate instructional materials. This study provides insight into teacher perspectives on the first three elements.

Curriculum Access

Teachers in this study, working in highly specialized settings, have increased their knowledge of curriculum standards. They have forged productive connections inside their schools and discovered others through state-sponsored training. They have begun gaining access to the curriculum and can use this information to teach their students.

The process is in place, but the separate nature of specialized programs distances these teachers from critical resources usually available in public school districts. Unlike the special education teachers studied by Nolet & McLaughlin (2000) and Thurlow (2002) teachers in out-of-district schools do not appear to have easy access to general education colleagues who can contribute curriculum knowledge, nor to school district curriculum coordinators or comprehensive libraries and media centers. Although included in curriculum discussions more than ever before, these teachers will

need additional supports to increase their knowledge and ability to match curriculum with the intense specialized instruction required by their students.

One source for these supports is the districts in which the schools operate or from which their students come. It may be that public schools, which do not believe they can deliver the services needed by students in these programs, may not have the resources to support needed curriculum adaptation (Kraemer & Ruzzi, 2001). In this case, other resources need to be nurtured.

Linking with inclusive public school programs and/or other out-of-district programs may prove productive in expanding knowledge. Establishing and utilizing these connections, however, is another challenge. Administrators of out-of-district programs, surveyed about their experiences leading programs to curriculum alignment (Byrnes, in press), identified finding time for curriculum alignment to be one of their major challenges. Many of the programs operate year round, leaving little time for focused group work. The shortage of qualified substitutes limits the option of releasing faculty during school time.

Massachusetts capitalized on the use of seasoned educators to design a Resource Guide to the Curriculum Frameworks (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001) to identify key elements of each standard, points of access, and strategies for instruction and assessment. Informal feedback from teachers is very positive. While it does not solve the problem of bringing teachers together physically, perhaps this teacher-designed reference can share some of the solutions teachers have crafted. Disseminating successful practices will be critical for teachers in separate settings.

Student Outcomes

Teachers demonstrated little optimism on Nolet and McLaughlin's (2000) first critical condition – the expectation that students will benefit from the changes. The intent of the standards-based movement is to help students achieve academic success that will lead to improved post-school outcomes (deFur, 2002, McDonnell, et.al, 1997). Teachers responding to this survey were not convinced the promise of rosier outcomes will be fulfilled. Many are concerned their students will drop out of school without an achievable diploma and then face limited post-school options.

Virginia began including all students in standards-based reform in 1995, one of the first states to do so. To assess perceptions of intended and unintended consequences for students with disabilities, deFur (2002) surveyed local special education administrators. She found that 73% believed positive outcomes included increased access to the general curriculum. However, a smaller percentage (21%) reported improved daily student performance. Simultaneously, course failure rates increased, as did the percentage of students who dropped out of school without earning a diploma. Administrators, like the teachers in this study, were concerned about post-school outcomes.

In an overlapping area, while IDEA-97 stresses the importance of every child's involvement with the general curriculum, it also emphasizes the importance of transition services to help students with disabilities prepare for employment and adult life. The challenges of meshing these two priorities may be more complex than meeting each separately (Johnson, Stodden, Emaneul, Luecking & Mack, 2002), especially for students who require substantial supports. Teams will need to design educational plans that carefully balance necessary therapeutic services, career preparation and academic content, especially for students who receive extensive services.

Next Steps on the Road to the Promise

For too many years, students who need intensive services – and their teachers - have been absent from discussions about the general curriculum. Legislation has changed this mindset. Progress is being made. Some intended consequences are being realized. Details about some predicted concerns are becoming clearer.

It takes time for any initiative to become rooted and bear fruit. This study was conducted in the first two years of the teachers' experience with the general curriculum and assessment system. The teachers surveyed represent those who have been most separate from the general curriculum. It is too early to come to conclusions, but perhaps the right time to amplify questions that McLaughlin, et.al (1997) began to ask as they urged educators to be watchful of both benefits and unintended consequences as we move to the general curriculum.

- What strategies can be instituted to ensure that teachers of children requiring substantial services outside the general education classroom receive the supports they need to learn the general education curriculum? How can we evaluate the effectiveness of these methods and disseminate their products?
- Do teachers of substantially separate programs in public schools approach this challenge differently than those in out-of-district schools? Do they have ready access to a wider range of resources? If so, what is the impact on curriculum and instruction? If not, what can be done to increase the breadth of resources for all students?
- Will students rise to the challenge and graduate from high school with increased knowledge or will the numbers not achieving this goal increase? If the latter, what will they do? How will society react?
- Will teachers become more positive about outcomes for their students as they become more familiar with the general curriculum and the ways it can be adapted?
- Will postsecondary options really be limited, as feared by these teachers and others who have studied the issue, or will new possibilities open up as a result of a closer connection to the general curriculum?
- What will special education services look like as educators strive to balance the individuality of the student and achievement on a unitary curriculum? What, if anything, will be sacrificed? Will educators, parents and students notice what has been lost, or what is gained?
- Will a unitary curriculum help students move more fluidly between local districts and specialized programs? Before statewide frameworks, students returning to the general classroom faced the dual hurdles of reintegrating into their home schools and "catching up" to the curriculum. Sometimes the enormity of these two challenges prevented students from ever returning. Will reform initiatives actually make delivering a continuum of services more seamless?

Inclusion in the general curriculum offers a strong promise to all students. Now that "all" includes students with disabilities, we need to be sure that fulfillment of that promise extends to students in all educational placements.

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Table 1

Responses by disabilty focus

	No. of Schools	No. of Responses
Emotional/Behavioral	14	86
Multiple disabilities	11	61
Language/LD: Emotional/Behavioral	8	53
Deaf/HOH	4	12
Language/learning disabilities	2	12
Mental retardation	1	5
Autism	1	4
Emotional/behavioral: Mental retardation	1	4
Total	**42**	**237**

Table 2

Percentage of teachers reporting method of student MCAS participation

	n	Routine	With Accom.	Alternate	Did Not Take	No. Resp.
L/LD:EBD	53	39.6%	75.5%		1.9%	3.8%
L/LD	12	25.0%	75.0%	33.3%		8.3%
EBD	86	20.9%	66.3%	4.7%	18.6%	7.0%
Deaf/HOH	12	16.7%	50.0%		33.3%	
Mult. Disab.	61	8.2%	54.1%	32.8%	1.6%	11.5%
Rout/Acc Ave.	**224**	**21.9%**	**64.7%**	**12.5%**	**4.5%**	**7.1%**
MR	5			80.0%		20.0%
Autism	4			100.0%		
EBD:MR	4				50.0%	50.0%
Alt Ave.	**13**			**61.5%**	**15.4%**	**23.1%**
Overall Average	**237**	**20.7%**	**61.2%**	**15.2%**	**5.1%**	**8.0%**

Table 3

Percentage of teachers reporting level of familiarity with state Curriculum Frameworks

	n	Very Familiar	Somewhat Familiar	Not Very Familiar
Rout/Acc Ave.	224	38.7%	56.4%	4.9%
Alt Ave.	13	15.4%	84.6%	
Overall Average	237	37.3%	58.0%	5.1%

Table 4

Percentage of teachers reporting mechanisms used to increase familiarity with state Curriculum Frameworks

	n	School Study Group	State Training	School District	Other
Rout/Acc Ave.	224	69.6%	26.3%	8.0%	27.2%
Alt Ave.	13	100.0%	23.1%		
Overall Average	237	71.3%	26.2%	7.6%	25.7%

Table 5

Percentage of teachers predicting student testing outcome

	n	Will Pass	Will Not Pass	Not Sure	No Resp.
Rout/Acc Ave.	**224**	5.4%	60.3%	34.8%	0.4%
Alt Ave.	**13**		100.0%		
Overall Average	**237**	**5.1%**	**62.4%**	**32.9%**	**0.4%**

Table 6

Percentage of teachers predicting whether students will stay in school if unlikely to receive diploma

	n	Stay	Not Stay	Not Sure	No Resp.
Rout/Acc Ave.	**224**	23.7%	55.8%	4.9%	14.3%
Alt Ave.	**13**	30.8%	7.7%		61.5%
Overall Average	**237**	**24.1%**	**53.2%**	**4.6%**	**16.9%**

Table 7

Percentage of teachers predicting post-school impacts for students not receiving diploma

	n	No Change	Some Affected	College Entry	Job Placement	Vocational Training	GED	No. Resp.
Rout/Acc Ave.	**224**	26.8%	55.4%	25.0%	22.3%	2.7%	0.4%	0.4%
Alt Ave.	**13**	38.5%	38.5%	15.4%	7.7%			23.1%
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